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World's End Postponed

How a Random Question About Science Ballooned Into a Cosmic Collision

By Joshua Lederberg

"ASTEROID PERILS EARTH; H-BOMB ATTACK STUDIED" was the headline of a front page story that

Science and Man

appeared in some newspapers July 27. It went on to say: "SYDNEY, Australia (UPI)—A Sydney University physicist said today the United States, Britain and Russia are studying the possibility of using a nuclear rocket to prevent an asteroid from smashing into earth.

"Prof. Stuart Thomas Butler said any microscopic deviation in the orbit of the asteroid Icarus could put it on a collision course with earth, causing 'a colossal force impact of great destruction' equal to the power of 1000 hydrogen bombs.

"An asteroid is a small planet with a diameter ranging from a fraction of a mile to nearly 500 miles. Butler, a 44-year-old professor of theoretical physics at Sydney University, said Icarus is nearly a mile wide and presently is on a 'near collision' course with earth. It will pass within four million miles of earth in June, 1968, he said."

THE STORY was not unnoticed in my community. The buzz of anxiety (happily mixed with skepticism) in common talk reminded me of Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast of 28 years ago.

One would think that a story about cosmic collisions would have a follow-up, but one looked for it in vain in the papers that headlined it. I was later delighted to find that The Washington Post had snubbed the first story but had later used the Smithsonian Observatory's inevitable and correct reassurance that this was humbug—a story, incidentally, written and distributed by UPI in Cambridge, Mass.

But how did the first story originate? Was Dr. Butler a charlatan or a naive publicity-monger? I wrote him, and now quote his reply full. It speaks for itself.

"Dear Prof. Lederberg:

The news item to which you refer could not have been more embarrassing. Its origin is amazingly simple.

I was telephoned by a local reporter who had been asked to follow up some insignificant mention of the asteroid Icarus which had appeared in his newspaper. My reply was that he could get all the information he required from an article that appeared in Scientific American in the April issue of 1965.

He subsequently rang back to ask whether I agreed with the material contained in the article. My reply was that I was not an astronomer but that Scientific American was a reliable journal in which articles were in general accurate. He then referred to some paragraph in the article relating to the possibility of us being able to deviate the orbit of Icarus and asked whether in fact this could be achieved. My laughing response was that if, in the dim, distant future, this were deemed necessary, presumably by that time something might be attempted.

Period!!

I was not contacted further and only woke up to the fact some days later that I was being attributed with having made the remarks that you yourself saw. All mention of Scientific American had apparently long since been forgotten.

I hope this is of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,
Stuart Butler."

DR. BUTLER has my respect and sympathy. So does a reading public already inflicted with enough anxieties about mass homicide in Vietnam or Texas.

The incident has too much thoughtlessness to be overlooked as a playful prank. In the frenzy to meet deadlines, and with their limited resources of technical expertise, the local papers must rely on their common sense and on the wire services.

I find it hard to believe that any responsible journalist would have credited the story. If it had any merit as news, rather than sensationa-

lism, it would have cried out for verification from NASA in Washington or from any reputable observatory.

Unfortunately, such sensationalism goes on all too often in science news-reporting and erodes the confidence of serious-minded scientists in speaking to the press. This hardly helps the public form an accurate picture of scientific enterprise or of its findings; it only degrades journalism.